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Part of the News

We Know What Leaked, Not Who

Washington.
TWENTY-ONE years have passed, almost to the day, since John F. Kennedy succeeded in killing news stories that would have disclosed a covert CIA operation in Latin America. The incident set off months of troubled self-examination within the press.

Now some of the same questions arise. Twice in recent weeks the Washington *Post* has published

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Page-1 stories based upon leaks at the highest levels of government. On February 19, the *Post* published excerpts from notes taken by a senior State Department official at conferences with Secretary Alexander Haig. On March 10, the *Post* quoted from highly classified documents dealing with a covert CIA operation in Nicaragua.

Was this responsible journalism?

The 1961 incident, of course, had to do with the Bay of Pigs invasion. Karl Meyer of *The New Republic* prepared an article, "Our Men in Miami." Gilbert Harrison, editor of the magazine, sent an advance text to the White House. President Kennedy asked that the piece be suppressed, and Mr. Harrison agreed to kill it. At about the same time, Tad Szulc filed a similar story to the *New York Times*. The newspaper's senior editors talked it over. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., special assistant to the president, James Reston counseled against publication. This was Mr. Schlesinger's memoir:

"Either the story would alert Castro, in which case the *Times* would be responsible for casualties on the beach, or else the expedition would be canceled, in which case the *Times* would be responsible for grave interference with national policy. [Killing the story] was a patriotic act, but in retrospect, I have wondered whether, if the press had behaved irresponsibly, it would not have spared the country a disaster."

The current circumstances are similar but not identical. In 1961 word of the Bay of Pigs operation was all over Miami. As events proved, Fidel Castro needed no warning from the *New York Times*. This time around we are dealing with a different matter. We are dealing with the disclosure of confidential papers having to do with private conversations and with truly covert operations.

The *Post*'s pious defense of its February 19 story is that the people have a right to know if Secretary Haig is saying one thing in private and something else in public. In breaking the March 10 story that President Reagan had authorized the CIA to train a paramilitary force of 500 Latin Americans, the *Post*'s position is far more defensible: This was news, and the duty of a newspaper is to report the news, not to suppress it.

I thought the February 19 story of Mr. Haig's private conversations was a dirty piece of business unworthy of a great newspaper. The *Post* didn't report the real news: It was mere gossip that in private Mr. Haig had called Britain's Lord Carrington a "duplicious bastard." The real news lay in the identity of the other duplicious bastard—the senior State Department official who had willfully or negligently violated the trust reposed in him. Why don't the people have a right to know who this was?

The same hard question has to be explored in the far more serious matter of the CIA's operation in Nicaragua. Who leaked to the *Post*? On the face of it, it seems evident that persons at the highest levels of the CIA or the National Security Council have engaged in conduct that approaches the traitorous. These "officials" have acted dishonorably once. We have to assume that, left unidentified, they will compromise other operations in the future.

If the identity of these moles is not news, I have wasted 40 years in the news business. Of course this is news, big news, but through some perversion of the journalists' code, it is not news you are likely to find reported in the *Washington Post*. Our sources, you know, must be protected.

If it had been my decision to make, after carefully verifying the smuggled documents, yes, I would have published the March 10 piece on the CIA operation. The consequences may be highly damaging to the national image, but the consequences be damned. If a national image of non-interventionism is false, we had better know the truth. The *Post* in this instance acted responsibly. But now, if the *Post* will not report the rest of the news, other investigative journalists should dig it out. Who are the moles? Surely the people have a right to know.